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World Chronicle

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GUEST: **David Harcharik**
Assistant Director-General for Forestry
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)

JOURNALISTS: Rob Watson, BBC
Thalif Deen, Inter Press Service

MODERATOR: Michael Littlejohns

FORESTRY

The world's forests are disappearing as a result of poorly managed commercial and private use. Deforestation in third world countries is caused by an increasing population that demands more land for agriculture. FAO, the Food and Agriculture Organization, advises and assists countries in their efforts to save their forests. Efficient and cost-effective means are the best approach to protect and conserve, on a sustainable basis, the forests of the world. These and a number of other forestry related issues are discussed by David Harcharik, the Food and Agriculture Organization's Assistant Director-General for Forestry.

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Executive Producer: Kamil Taha
Director: Livingston Hinckley
Production Assistant: Ellen McGuffie

ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Forests play a vital role in our lives. They provide habitat for about two-thirds of all species on earth. They're essential to maintain the soil and water resource base and the ecological balance necessary for food and agricultural production. They provide food for humans and fodder for livestock, energy for cooking for almost half of the world's population, as well as employment and income. But over the last few decades they are disappearing at an alarming rate. How can we strike a balance between preserving this natural heritage and achieving sustainable economic development? Our guest today is an expert in the field of forestry. He is David Harcharik, the Food and Agriculture Organization's Assistant Director-General for Forestry. Joining me to talk with Mr. Harcharik are Rob Watson of the BBC and Thalif Deen of Inter Press Service.

Mr. Harcharik, welcome to World Chronicle.

HARCHARIK: Thank you very much.

LITTLEJOHNS: There was a recent disaster in Indonesia through the burning of extensive areas of forestry. The fires apparently were set by people wanting to clear the land for agriculture. I'm not aware that the United Nations got involved in trying to do something about that, although it was a tremendous event. It caused great – in fact, an airplane crashed as a result of the atmosphere being so polluted, and in fact the smoke apparently was observed far away from the actual scene of the crime, as one would call it. Why didn't the FAO get into it?

HARCHARIK: The role of FAO is not to either manage forests directly, or in this case to send fire-fighters to a country that might need them. Our role is to advise countries, to help them develop the technologies that they might need to respond to the problems that they would encounter, to seek opportunities for investment, and basically to facilitate, encourage, advise and to seek investment. It's very difficult for the United Nations itself to get directly involved in managing any particular tract of land. Now, in this particular case, we did contact the Ministry of Forestry in Indonesia; we asked for information about the extent of the fires; and we offered our assistance, not so much in responding to this immediate emergency, which was extremely large, but to work with them over the coming year to hopefully prevent or lessen the possibility that this might happen in the future.

WATSON: What were the lessons from that? What went wrong?

HARCHARIK: Well, it's a very complex situation, as you might imagine. But most of the forest fires there were deliberately set. They were set by organizations that were clearing

land for agriculture. Much of this land had been subjected to timber harvesting previously, and is now in the process of being converted to agriculture. Using fire as a tool for land clearing is cheap, and it was the preferred land clearing tool. Of course, the particular situation this year in Indonesia was exacerbated by a 50-year drought brought on in part by El Niño, but an extremely serious situation beyond what is normally experienced there. They do have this occur almost every year, but not to the extent that it occurred this year. And then of course they –

WATSON: A bit of a wake up call, though, isn't it? A bit of a wake-up call, it looked terrible! Something must be going very seriously wrong there.

HARCHARIK: It draws attention also to some of the international dimensions of the forestry issues today. What happens in one country affects what happens in another country, affects the health and well being, safety of individuals in another country. We see that increasingly with issues such as air pollution, and now forest fires, to a certain extent climate change –

WATSON: So in that sense, I mean, it could possibly be a wake-up call?

HARCHARIK: I think it draws attention to the seriousness of the forest issues today, yes.

WATSON: I was just curious, to sort of row back a little bit, talking about the state of the world's forests, what is the state of the world's forests, in broad outline? Is it dead, dying, critical, still saveable? How would you describe it?

HARCHARIK: Well, if you look at what's happening in most of the industrialized countries, the forest cover has essentially stabilized; in fact, it's growing back. So there's an increase in forest cover in most of North America and in the rest of the industrialized world. In the tropics, the situation is different. In developing countries, the rate of deforestation continues to be very high. And the difference in my opinion is largely due to economic development. The state of economic development in the industrialized world has taken pressure off of the forest, and in the tropical world there is a great demand for agriculture land.

DEEN: You spoke of an international dimension. And since the Earth Summit in Rio five years ago, the UN has been struggling to create a UN convention on forests. Do you know why this has been stalled?

HARCHARIK: It's been stalled because there's disagreement amongst the countries themselves as to whether they want the convention or whether they don't. In fact, there's a very interesting situation. If you go back to 1990 when this was first proposed, and then it was debated in the build-up of the UN Conference on Environment and Development, the Earth Summit 1992, there was no consensus then. But some countries that favoured the

convention in 1992 oppose a convention today, and others who opposed it then favour it today. There's a change in position of some countries. I would think that today there's probably greater support for a convention than there was in 1992, but there continues to be serious resistance on the part of some countries.

LITTLEJOHNS: The United States included, I believe.

HARCHARIK: The United States is officially opposed to a convention, a legally-binding convention.

DEEN: Are they being pressured by big business interests? Or – that's one of the –

HARCHARIK: Now, I think you want to ask that question to the United States, some delegate from the United States. But it's my understanding that in the US there's a fairly strong resistance to a convention within the Government, the private industries, and most of the non-governmental environmental groups.

DEEN: But the European Union is fairly supportive of the convention.

HARCHARIK: The European Union is supportive of the convention; so is Canada. Some tropical countries are in favour of a convention now, but there continues to be resistance.

LITTLEJOHNS: The FAO feels that it's very essential that there be a convention?

HARCHARIK: FAO does not have an official position on a convention. We don't feel that it is our role. This is a matter for national governments to decide, whether they want to negotiate a legally-binding convention. We will help provide a forum where these issues can be discussed; we will help try to identify what we think the advantages and disadvantages are of a convention. But it's not up to FAO to have a position per se. That's a matter for national Governments.

WATSON: But if you were to take your UN hat off – you are a forestry expert – what would your personal view be?

HARCHARIK: In my mind there are a number of advantages in having a convention. A convention could demonstrate the highest political commitment that a Government could make to sustainable forestry. So if you have the political commitment, and you have something substantive, then I think a convention could be a useful thing. Now, keep in mind, you have to have something substantive. Now, what we had at Rio was a very lengthy statement of principles. It's easier to agree to principles than it is to something substantive, and I think a convention, if it were negotiated, should have some substance to it and it should be broader than a statement of principles. So if there's political commitment, and if there's substance to a convention, and if there's something for everybody in it, in other words, if it's an incentive to elevate forest practices in every country in the world, then a

convention could be useful. If Governments are opposed immediately to a convention, then we run the risk of years of debate that can be extremely divisive, that may slow us from acting on other initiatives, and in the end may produce a watered-down statement that would not be helpful. So, yes, my personal opinion is difficult. There are advantages and disadvantages. I can see the advantages, but if we don't agree up front that the convention is desirable, then I think we're going to get lost in years of endless and divisive debate.

WATSON: Well, let's put it another way. Whether there's a convention or not, what needs to be done to make sure that we've still got some trees left by the time I've got some grandchildren?

HARCHARIK: I assume you're referring to deforestation, how would we like to slow deforestation. I need to elaborate a bit. Deforestation has many causes. We tend to think of the direct causes and the indirect causes. But the direct ones are more obvious. It's primarily the clearing of land for agriculture – commercial agriculture, subsistence agriculture, fuel wood – and most of the tropical countries rely very heavily on fuel wood; in some cases timber harvesting provides an access to shifting agriculture or it degrades the forest and makes it easier to convert to some other use. But most of the direct causes of deforestation are the expansion of agriculture land. But this is fuelled by what is referred to as the indirect causes. Why is there expansion of agriculture? Well, the population explosion is continuing; there continues to be excessive rates of poverty in the world; in some places consumption patterns or international trade, government policies, economic growth, infrastructure development – all of these things impact on the forest. It makes it an issue that is extremely difficult for the forestry community to address itself. Foresters are trained and generally qualified, I would like to say, to address the issues within the forest. But these socioeconomic, political issues from the outside that impact on the forest are extremely difficult for any one profession to address, and they really need political commitment.

WATSON: Sounds like a choice between babies and trees.

DEEN: When you talk about the destruction of trees, what percentage of this destruction is attributed to the global news media, in terms of newsprint?

HARCHARIK: Well, I'm not sure how to answer your question. Again, most of the deforestation, which is conversion of forest to some other land use, most of that, most, not all, but most is a result of converting to agriculture, and much of that – some of that wood is used. Often it is simply wasted on site. Most of the pulp and paper production that goes into newsprint, most of that comes from managed forests, either managed natural forests or plantation forests. And that itself is generally not a cause of deforestation.

WATSON: It's something that is interesting. So I think there is a wide – I mean, I certainly believed that the reason why that we were using lots of trees was because people were making money for them rather than that they were clearing the way for agriculture. Well, I think that's probably a general perception.

HARCHARIK: The forestry community would generally argue that if we can manage forests in such a way that the value of forests as a forest is higher than that value of that land in agriculture, then the forest will be protected. If we can make money off of the forests by managing them for wood and other products, then it's unlikely that they will be converted to other forms of land use that may make more money. So it's important to produce products, it's important to have good timber industries and good timber forest harvesting operations, but they must be well managed, and the land base must be controlled. If all we do is go into the forest, extract the wood, and we leave behind a degraded forest that has not been cut properly and that has arteries, roads that allow ready access for shifting agriculture, or if the forest is so degraded that then it's better to convert it to pasture, then you've got problems. So the forestry profession has a substantial role to play in this, but it's not something that we can do by ourselves.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is David Harcharik, FAO's Assistant Director-General for Forestry.

Mr. Harcharik, I was recently in the Pacific northwest and saw some of the ravages of clear cutting. Does FAO have a position on clear cutting? Do you as a forester have any views about it?

HARCHARIK: FAO does not have a specific position on clear-cutting. But if you would think that -- one of the most important concepts that we have in forestry today is a general one; it's not technology, it's a concept that's called sustainable forestry or sustainable forest management. I know that's a cumbersome term and it's kind of a mouthful, but what it really means is that we are trying to put more balance into our approach to managing forests. We are trying to protect the environmental values of forests, more so than we've done before, to look first at a forest as a living, holistic, ecological system and not simply as a source of wood or other products. Looking at the environmental values of forests. Second, we must manage our forests in such a way that they produce an economic product that people use -- wood and other non-wood forest products – and we must involve people in a decision-making process. And very important, in the past I think many foresters took pride in their profession and in their training and their service; we felt that we were working on behalf of the public, we were providing a service, we were working for the people. Now, it's different. The communities of interest are greater than they were before. We must not work only with the people, we have to work – we must work with the people, not for the

people. It's a different concept. So when you get into clear-cutting, well, is clear-cutting, is it a practice that is acceptable by local communities and others? Are they involved in the decisions that clear-cutting is appropriate?

LITTLEJOHNS: Well, the logging companies evidently feel that it is appropriate, but maybe some people in the involved communities don't.

HARCHARIK: Yes, but clear-cutting in an ecological sense has been a successful way to harvest forests economically and to regenerate them, depending on the forest. Many forests regenerate naturally after some devastating natural effect, like forest fires, especially those in the northwest United States. Clear-cutting in essence mimics a forest fire in many types. So it's an acceptable silvicultural tool –

LITTLEJOHNS: Makes a hell of a mess of the landscape, though.

HARCHARIK: It can be very damaging to the landscape, if it's not done properly. But I think what you will see in the United States, I know in the Forest Service, and it's being followed in much of private industry, they are reducing the size of clear-cuts and they are looking at clear-cutting only as an exception and not as the standard way of dealing with forests. In the past, there was a tendency to go in and clear-cut as the standard harvesting and silvicultural tool, and now they've changed the practices in the Forest Service to where it's on an exceptional basis as opposed to standard practice. So there's a movement away from clear-cutting and a movement away from the large clear-cuts.

WATSON: It's interesting, you've sort of shattered another one of my misperceptions. First of all, I didn't know that deforestation was mainly due to replacement with agriculture needs, and I also thought that we were going to get into a good session here of bashing logging companies, but you seem to be suggesting that they're relatively responsible in their behaviour.

HARCHARIK: It's difficult to generalize. I've tried to say that the most immediate direct causes of deforestation are agriculture, but often it makes it easier to convert to agriculture if you have access to the land, and that access is often provided by logging companies.

WATSON: So they are bad guys.

HARCHARIK: There are plenty of firms that are not practising forestry the way we would like to see it practised. Not every harvesting company or logging firm practices according to law, and not everyone does the type of work that we would like him to do. There's a huge range of quality in some of the work that's being done –

WATSON: Can you give us – I mean, maybe without actually identifying a company that'll end us up with lawsuits, could you give an example of what, you know, the kind of thing that logging companies do which aren't a good idea?

HARCHARIK: Well, there are I think perhaps too many cases where companies have cut beyond the boundary of the cut, the physical boundary; there are perhaps cases where they've taken trees beyond what they're supposed to take. Often the Government will even mark individual trees that should be taken. In other cases they will allow a certain cut, a certain volume to be harvested. In some cases it's only certain species or above a certain size. And often if the companies are not closely monitored they may take an excessive volume or they may take species that they shouldn't, or instead of taking only the large trees they take smaller trees. So you have these issues of compliance with the contract, which should have been written according to the laws. It's not unlike many other contracts, there's always the business of compliance.

DEEN: Since deforestation is primarily an environmental issue, where does the FAO come in relation to the UN Environment Programme? Or are you duplicating the work of each other?

HARCHARIK: No, I don't think so. The United Nations Environment Programme is not an executing agency per se, not like FAO is. They do – they get involved in some forestry issues, but they have a fairly small forestry programme. FAO's work is much, much broader. We deal with a range of issues. I mentioned the environmental, the economic and the social. FAO deals with these issues in a holistic way. The United Nations Environment Programme concentrates more on the environmental dimensions of forestry, and not so much on forest management per se, but perhaps the impact on climate, biological diversity, et cetera. So we work very closely with them on some matters.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Harcharik, we mentioned in the introduction the fact that the forests provide habitat for about two-thirds of all species on earth. Do you want to address that question a bit, particularly the impact on endangered species of deforestation?

HARCHARIK: Well, it's tremendous –

LITTLEJOHNS: Is that something FAO is involved in?

HARCHARIK: We're very concerned about that. Again, this is primarily the result of deforestation, but I would say also degradation, the declining value or quality of forest because of either environmental abuses or harvesting abuses. It can result in a loss of habitat, a loss of landscapes, altering of landscapes, which would change species compositions. Often it destroys species directly, or it can reduce the genetic diversity in species, which also is a concern in the context of biological diversity. The tropical forests cover about 7 per cent of the land area of the earth, excluding Greenland and Antarctica, but they have, I believe, about 50 per cent of the species on the land area. So you can see that the tropical forests are a particularly unique repository of biological diversity, and any change in tropical forests is apt to have a big impact on biological diversity.

WATSON: Well, I can't resist playing devil's advocate for a minute. I mean, why the hell should anyone care? I mean, the, world has changed an awful lot since a thousand years ago in order to accommodate the growing human civilization. Europe is very different now from what it was before the industrial revolution. Everyone's still alive, people are still going in to work. Why the hell should we care?

HARCHARIK: Well, I think a biologist would give you many answers, but let me give you one.

WATSON: But it's true, isn't it? The world hasn't come to an end. I mean, not yet, anyway.

HARCHARIK: But it's sort of like saying it's not broke, so why try to fix it. And I think if we have that attitude we're never going to make progress. We've got to be trying to do things better and prevent the unwanted things from happening. Much of the progress that we have made may be because we've had a variety of options and choices that we can make as we go down this road towards development, and that might include options in terms of species, plants and animals, that we can eat and that we can use for fibre. Now, you take away the rich biological diversity, and in the future you're limiting your options. You simply don't have the biological material there on which you can develop new products in the future. And there will be changes in society. Our wants, our desires, our needs will change. And if we have that gene pool there we have something to go back to.

WATSON: I was only playing devil's advocate. I'm actually rather fond of trees, and I certainly am in favour of keeping the forests here.

LITTLEJOHNS: Rob the tree hugger?

WATSON: Again, though, to sort of bring things down to I guess the sort of fundamental level, going back to the main problem that you mentioned, which was agricultural land taking over the forests, I mean, say I was some, I don't know, I'm a farmer in Latin America and I've got my little farm on the edge of this very nice looking bit of jungle, and I think, oh, lovely, I could make this jungle into a nice, I don't know, potato field. Why shouldn't I? What could I do, what could I do to make my life better without planting some spuds there?

HARCHARIK: Well, you probably would. And people have for over centuries. What has happened, though, is if you take the shifting agriculture, an individual farmer who cuts a hectare of land and he converts that into corn or whatnot, the soil in most of the tropics – not all, but in most – is not particularly rich. And the sun and the rain, they're intense. So after a few years, three to five years of producing maize, corn, you need to move on, because you've lost the soil base. So you chop down another piece of forest. Now, if you don't have very many people in a large forest, you can move around the forest, and the

area that you cleared over time will regenerate and it'll grow back. So in that sense it's a natural and acceptable process, and man is part of the ecological system. But if you move around too fast the forest doesn't regenerate, and you may move around when you've got increased populations. It's a natural thing for a small farmer or a rural peasant to do.

WATSON: What could I do to make a few bucks out of my little bit of forest nearby me without chopping it down?

HARCHARIK: We are trying to encourage people to integrate tree crops and agriculture crops, not simply to cut down all of the trees, but to leave some and to integrate the agriculture product with the tree crop, and hopefully the tree will come – the forest will come back sooner that way, and also to extract the multiple products that come from forests. Now, in an industrial sense, wood is far and away the most valuable product that we have in the forest, but in the context of a small farmer, a peasant, there may be other values and products that that person can extract from the forest. And if we can help, if we can work with them in identifying marketable commercial products that he can extract from forests, that will help some.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Harcharik, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**.

Our guest has been David Harcharik, the Food and Agriculture Organization's Assistant Director-General for Forestry. He was interviewed by Rob Watson of the BBC and Thalif Deen of Inter Press Service. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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